Sharecropping

The collapse of the South's slave-based labor system and the wide spread destruction and neglect of railroads, factories, and plantations that had occurred during the Civil War left the South's predominantly agriculture economy in shambles. That forced planters like Phanor Prud'homme to renegotiate their relationships and contracts with their former slaves, at least with those "who did not leave with the Yankees in the spring of 1864".

Tenancy (i.e., renting of land on which to produce crops) offered some semblance of freedom, but few of the freed slaves, most with nothing but the clothes on their backs, had even the modest resources required to consider tenancy. Instead, they contracted with planters to produce a crop, almost always cotton, to which they would be entitled a certain "share;' usually no more than half, at the end of the season.

While sharecropping did not require a cash outlay for land rental, it did require seed and equipment, which most "croppers" could not afford to buy.

Neither owners nor workers liked the systems. Former slaves aspired to "setup for themselves", instead of working in the constant shadow of whites.

With no chance of land distribution freedpeople (as well as thousands of landless whites) opted for a half-way measure which allowed them to work individual farms on shares to obtain capital for eventual land ownership.

At Oakland the sharecrop system began about 1868 and was in

full operation by the early 1870s. At Oakland and throughout the plantation South, plantations were divided into small units and were "rented" to individual owners.

Share-crop tenants were generally provided by the landowner with land, tools, work animals, and seeds. For this, the owner would receive one-half of the crop as payment. Most of Oakland's tenants worked on this arrangement and called themselves "half-hands" and croppers. If the farmer could provide his own tools, animals, and seeds, he received three-fourths of the crop he raised, giving the landowner one-fourth for use of the land. Tenants call those who worked under such an arrangement "renters" rather than croppers and were "fourthhands", or worked on fourths. In both arrangements, additional deductions from the prospective crop were taken for charged supplies and food--from the supply merchant who was often the landowner.

In many cases, the crop lien system and credit merchant system bound black families to the land; they would become indebted for the next year's crop, and it proved to be a cruel, oppressive system for workers and unprofitable for owners as well. In the plantation South, the vast majority of Southern workers started the new century, nearly thirty years after emancipation, still a landless, agricultural labor force, operating tenant farms, with little chance to obtain the land, literacy, money, and skills necessary for advancement.

Interestingly, at least one worker labored on a share contract in 1866, just after the war. This was Rene Plaisance who received \$163.62 on December 31, 1866, "his wages being a share of one fourth of mares which should go to the horses" and

"a portion of his share on the horses."

In family papers, a sample lien form was found, as follows: "Whereas I has or have received from J A P advances of necessary supplies to enable me to cultivate during the current year A D 1873 on the plantation known as J. Alp P'S Plantation in Cane River.

Therefore in order to secure said A P the reimbursement of such necessary supplies as he has already advanced ad furnished me and also to secure him payment for any other necessary supplies and for any advances he may make to me in supplies and in money to purchase necessary supplies and defray necessary expenses of said plantation during the said year A D 1873 I hereby acknowledge his lien and privilege on all the crop on said plantation, during said year 1873. Shipment to be made by said J. Alp P. from time to time as the cotton is gathered, ginned & pressed—to be sold by A. M & P and proceeds thereof applied by them to payment of any amount and all amounts which I may then be indebted to J. Alp P for advances made & necessary supplies furnished by said J Alp P. the balance of any to be held subject to my order."

1. Oakland Plantation, Its People Testimony by Anne Malone pp. 112-115